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The truth about Petrov...

FOR 26 years bitter controversy has surrounded the names of the Russian diplomats Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov.

Their defection has been linked to a conspiracy with Australian Security and the Menzies Government, which was fighting for its life in the 1954 federal elections.

But a key figure in the affair has emerged with a story refuting those theories.

He is Michael Thwaites, 64, who was a director of ASIO's counterespionage branch between 1950 and 1971.

In a new book, "Truth Will Out — ASIO and the Petrovs," Thwaites says that Menzies had nothing to do with the move.

"All the facts known to me confirm that Menzies had nothing to do with the timing of Petrov's defection," he says.



"Should fresh evidence come to light proving that he did pull the strings, while keeping Spry (now Sir Charles Spry and then Director General of ASIO), myself and ASIO's counterespionage branch in ignorance, his public career as Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister must appear as a waste of his real talents.

"As a super-agent in the world of secret intelligence he could have made Kim Philby look like a fumbling innocent."

Thwaites says the first Menzies knew of the defection was April 4, 1954 — a day after Petrov, Third Secretary at the Russian Embassy in Canberra and a colonel in the Soviet MVD secret service, sought political asylum.

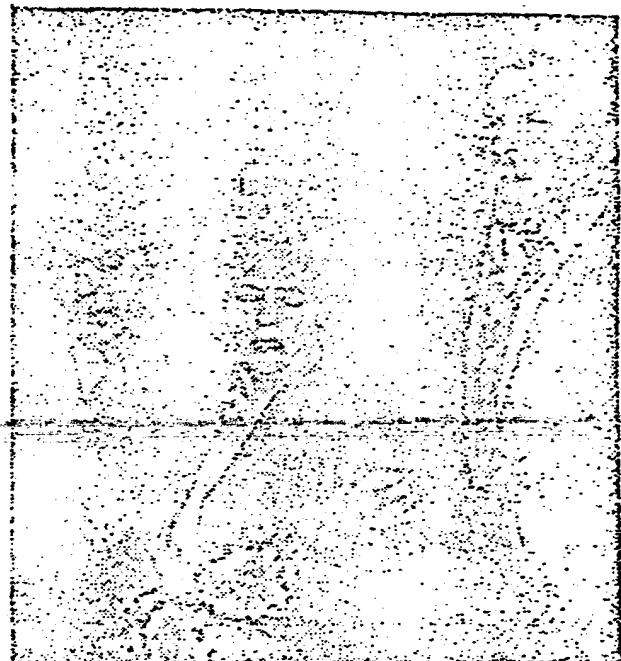
But Thwaites acknowledged in an interview, the affair had been "some help" to Menzies in the ensuing elections in May, which were held against the background of the ALP leading opinion polls.

Sixteen days after Petrov defected, his wife Evdokia, also an MVD officer, asked for asylum in dramatic circumstances.

Mrs Petrov was kept a virtual prisoner in the embassy, and was so distraught, reveals Thwaites, that she attempted to hang herself with the flex of an electric iron.

On April 19 she was driven from Canberra to Sydney in the custody of two Soviet couriers for a flight back to Moscow.

At Sydney airport she was dragged stumbling



The scene at Sydney Airport in 1954 as Mrs Petrov is hustled to her plane by Soviet couriers.

across the tarmac as a huge, angry crowd looked on.

Unknown to her, says Thwaites, her husband was watching from under a tarpaulin in a utility parked near the runway where ASIO had hoped to arrange a meeting. But the violence and the confusion of the crowd had ruled this out.

The 7½-hour flight to Darwin gave Mrs Petrov her first chance to collect her wits — and gave ASIO a chance to consider further action.

It was in Darwin, where the plane stopped to refuel, that Australian police and officials parted Mrs Petrov from her bodyguards, and Mrs Petrov soon was driving away with an Australian official, "to the safety of the Australian Government".

Thwaites, who after resigning from ASIO worked as Assistant Parliamentary Librarian in Canberra until 1976, was in charge of the Petrov case from its beginnings in 1952.

But it was not until 1954 that he met them, when he began the process of debriefing them.

He reveals that during the following 18 months he was given the task of ghostwriting the Petrov's book, "Empire of Fear".

"Our success over the Petrov defection put ASIO on the map both in Australia and overseas in a way that nothing else could have done," he says.

• THE TRUTH WILL OUT — ASIO AND THE PETROVS, by Michael Thwaites (Collins); \$14.95.